

May 9 2012

Election Outcomes in Algeria

LSE IDEAS

By *Lakhdar Ghattas*

On 10th May the Algerian regime is holding parliamentary elections against a backdrop of a string of strikes, protests, riots, and the spectre of a massive [boycott and abstention](#). In trying to reverse the tide of boycotts the regime exposed its profound anxiety, which was decoded by Algerians as a sign of an acute vulnerability. This unprecedented stand-off between the regime and society is a real nightmare for the secret services (DRS), which hopes to portray the participation in the May elections as a vote of confidence which offers the current regime, amongst other things, legitimacy from abroad. The regime's strategy is for the parliamentary elections to be presented as a popular validation of the political reforms, initiated a year ago. Moreover, it would maintain on track the reforms roadmap (holding local election next autumn, passing a new constitution which would in turn govern the spring 2014 presidential elections). For all those considerations, the success of the May elections is crucial for the regime's continuity agenda. However, the almost certain high levels of abstention scenario threatens to upset the regime's self-regeneration strategy. Therefore, three likely outcomes can be identified a week before elections.

The Status-Quo Scenario:

Elections would take place with an acceptable turn-out resembling the recent Tunisian, Moroccan and Egyptian elections. International media correspondents together with the [West's election observers](#) would be present in several carefully selected polling stations to witness that elections were free and fair. A new assembly would be elected in calm, and a new constitution would be drafted during its autumn session, and ratified in early 2013 via a parliamentary vote or referendum. By then the presidential elections race would have started, giving the regime enough time to prepare a replacement for Bouteflika. One strong potential candidate would be former PM Mouloud Hamrouche. Another option would be Ali Benflis, former PM, who ran against Bouteflika in 2004. There, is already an [online support campaign](#) for him.

The problem with this scenario is that it can only be true in the virtual sphere the regime had created to run the state of affairs in Algeria. There is a segment of society which the regime seems to have forgotten or at least underestimated in its dynamism. That segment is the unemployed who have witnessed the regime pour billions to the striking active force in the form of pay raises and generous loans in order to buy social peace. Buying social peace has so far been counter-productive for the regime in that it only encouraged other sectors to exert more pressure on the government and ask for more material gains from a regime they increasingly perceive as very weak and desperate. For a year now that segment of society, which has felt for years it had no significant leverage on the regime, now sees in the May elections a rare opportunity to punish the regime and inflict maximum damage on it by not only abstaining but also trying to disrupt the elections. A plethora of videos on Youtube and Facebook document acts of vandalism against election campaign boards, several candidates rallies have been disrupted, ministers chased away, etc. It is their leverage. Acts of self-immolations have been fuelling anger. Last week alone three acts took place in Tiaret, Laghouat and Jijel. The fatal self-immolation act of Rachak Hamza, 25, [triggered riots](#) which results in the burning down of the FLN party offices, attacks on a police station and other government buildings. It is unlikely that the status-quo scenario will hold. All it can do is buy the regime some more time until the next local elections in autumn, when we will witness a re-run of the whole episode. Judging by the Jijel riots last week violence might break out in several towns on Election Day, which might prompt the regime to change tactics in an attempt to re-generate itself.

The Regime-Regeneration Scenario:

Plan A- Cancel the Elections

The regime has made its intentions clear in the substance and style in which the reforms were introduced: real change is out of the question and that it is adamant to keep hold of power and resist any power-sharing with society. Fully mindful of the Great Arab Intifada climate, the changed regional environment and ongoing daily protests the DRS would nonetheless, force its agenda and secure another stamp-rubber parliament by means of the same old tricks it masters well. Indeed all the regime needs is respectful turn-out. The DRS would test the waters in the immediate days following elections and gauge the streets' pulse. This scenario believes there would be massive protests country-wide which would turn into riots. Should unrest reach, say 20% of the magnitude of the January 2011 riots, and spread in time and space over a week, then the army would intervene, cancel election, and promise that real reforms would be implemented over summer following which fresh parliamentary elections coupled with local ones would be held in autumn. Then it would wait and take the streets' pulse again.

Plan B- Oust Bouteflika

Should Plan A fail to restore order while respected figures emerge to lead the protests and articulate political demands for genuine reform, the DRS might then oust Bouteflika either through anticipated presidential elections or by invoking article 88 in the Constitution; which calls for snap elections in two months, in case of the incumbent president's inability to attend to his duties. The DRS would orchestrate a huge PR campaign to portray the Algerian army as siding with the people just as the Tunisian and Egyptian armies did. Both plans would ensure a re-generation of the regime, in that only the civilian face of the regime would be change but not the regime itself.

The Peaceful Radical Change Scenario

Elect a Constituent Assembly:

Should both Plans A and B fail and protests led by credible figures manage to maintain momentum and the situation starts to slip out of the hands of the DRS, the army might concede to opening dialogue with the *real* opposition. There is already consensus on the general framework of transition buy a number of movements such as the Initiative for [Democratic Change in Algeria](#) or [Dr. Benbitour's roadmap](#).

Both initiatives call, in essence, for the creation of a transitional council (formed by respected figures, inside and outside the state's structures, known for their integrity and probity) whose mandate would be, among others, the appointment of a transitional government. The transitional government would oversee the preparation of the election of a constituent assembly, which would in turn draft a new constitution and hold a referendum to pass it. Presidential and legislative elections would be then held following which new institutions would be established.

The likelihood of each scenario

The DRS has been actively gauging the planned abstention intentions rate, directly through its traditional means and indirectly through its propaganda papers. While all indications lead to the conclusion that abstention will be massive and that only 10%, at worst, and 20%, at best, would turn out on Election Day, an official poll by the state statistics institute placed turn-out estimates at 50%. Beyond the credibility of the state's figures, what matters for our analysis here is that 50% is the turn out rate the regime hopes for or rather deems acceptable in order to ensure credibility of the May elections. When we recall that in the last parliamentary elections in 2007 official turn-out was 34%, which did not worry the regime at all, as shown by their lack of interest in rigging the participation rate, we can then get a sense of the DRS' current concerns. That was 2007 and a lot has happened in Algeria and the Arab world since then. The regime needs at least 50% this time. If the regime finds itself forced to regenerate itself, cancelling the elections is more likely than ousting Bouteflika. Cancelling election is less troublesome than ousting a president. It is no longer the same world as in 1992 when they ousted President Chadli Bendjedid. A direct coup is therefore out of the question but Plan A, on the other hand, presents some complications.

Plan A complicates things further for the regime. First, from May to Autumn is a very long time in politics. A great deal can happen next summer (frequent power cuts, unrest following poor BAC exam results given the number and length of strikes, etc). Second, cancelling elections would strip credibility from any moves by the regime even if backed by the West, whose support the regime brandishes to Algerians in every occasion. Third, it derails the reforms roadmap in that it delays the adoption of a new constitution offered to Algerians as the coronation of reforms. Fourth, the reforms roadmap did not specify whether the new constitution should be adopted by parliamentary vote or a referendum. So cancelling the elections and holding them with the local ones would entail adopting the new constitution through referendum. The question is then: would the regime run the risk of another mobilising occasion such as a referendum, especially if the local elections were seen as not free and fair? Would the regime even dare to rig the second re-run of elections? And what does all this means for the presidential elections in 2014, for which the May elections are the springboard? These four factors make Plan B (ousting Bouteflika) a lesser evil for the DRS.

But Plan B faces a legal stumbling block. Last April Bouteflika pre-emptively appointed his Minister of Justice Tayeb Belaiz as president of the Constitutional Council; blocking the Article 88 backdoor in anticipation of Plan B,. It was another episode in the regime's inter-clan power struggle. Nevertheless, it is not a fail-proof measure; in unusual circumstances the DRS and the army can always force their agenda, especially if they present it as a necessary option for transition. But will Algerians accept another theatrical act in the ongoing political circus offered by the regime, or force a more radical change scenario?

The challenge for the advocates of radical change in Algeria is twofold: foil Plans A and B on one hand, and create conditions for the success of the radical change scenario on the other hand. The January 2011 protests failed to effect change for one main reason: no credible leadership emerged on the ground to lead the protest and transform that momentum into a political dynamism for change. Thus, despite the protests magnitude and geographical expansion and despite the killing of five protesters by police the protests mutated into riots. This mutation facilitated the regime's task for violence is the only means of dialogue it prefers with society.

The regime has done everything possible to [silence dissident civil society](#). The latest cases are a [one-year sentence against Abdelkader Kherba](#), and the [extradition warrant against Dr.Mourad Dhina](#), co-founder of the [Rachad Movement](#). Imprisonment, repression, and other coercion techniques have forced activists and politicians into forced exile or silence since 1992. Two decades on, even those who were close to the regime or gave it the benefit of the doubt, have now become convinced of the necessity of real change. This is the case, among many others, of respected figures such as the career diplomat [Lakhdar Brahimi](#), former PM [Dr. Benbitour](#), and the former director of the Algerian Central Bank A. Hadj-Nacer. Both Benbitour and Had-Nacer have published heart-breaking [biographies](#) recently;

in which they catalogue their disillusionment with the current regime and call for radical change before chaos besets Algeria. It is the acts of figures like these joining forces with the real opposition which is denying the regime its cliché charges of the foreign hand and subversive plots it often brandishes to discredit dissidents.

IF the three scenarios fail then it is feared change will be chaotic as Algerian affairs experts such as [Dr. Lahouari Addi](#) at Science Po Lyon, and former high ranking intelligence officer [Dr.Chafik Mesbah](#) warned last week. But retired former commander of the Algerian navy Genarl M'hand Yaala, who has set up the [Movement for Citizenship](#), and called for radical change asserted in an unprecedented talk over [Rachad TV](#), last week, *"we will not let Algerians pay another heavy price... we will not allow another Syrian scenario in Algeria."*

This entry was posted in [Africa](#), [Middle East](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).